

"Eco-Fashion is an Oxymoron": An Interview with Boardroom CEO Mark Trotzuk About the Environmental Cost of Clothing

Ingrid Bruggestrass Posted: Jan 18th, 2010



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The company was founded in 1996. Have you always used sustainable and organic materials?

Not at all. We started around 2003 and in 2004. Times were a little different between 1996-1999. There wasn't this push toward being environmentally friendly with clothing and I really didn't have any knowledge at all of how much damage my company was doing to the environment.

The whole industry has this whole "don't ask, don't tell" attitude. I've asked questions and they'll tell you its recycled material, they'll tell you its recycled paper, but if you ask for proof, suddenly the story changes. [It becomes], but no, we didn't originally use sustainable materials---now we use them as much as we can.

What caused the change?

I was having a child and started to look at the impact of what we do. We sell apparel for quick turn-around events, promotional wear geared toward throwaway apparel. For example when you go to a fun-run and you're given a t-shirt, do you value that t-shirt?

Not really and with the whole fashion industry its, "Hey, we want you to buy this shirt, today and tomorrow we want you to buy another shirt, and then another shirt because the styles have changed."

I studied this and discovered that clothing is probably more damaging than a lot of other industries. I realized I was a part of the problem, but at the same time I realized I could make a big difference by changing my whole business around.

The biggest motivator was my daughter, Rio Rain. When she's 16 and asking questions about what I'm doing, if I can't say I've changed, knowing what I know about the industry, [if I can't tell her] I made an effort to try to be environmentally friendly, then I'd be doing her and her generation a disservice. If I've kept business as usual, knowing what I know, it'd be ignorant and just the wrong thing to do.

What drives you to be such an active member of the environmental movement?

We're screwed. You look at the population growth that we have on this planet. It's gone from 1 billion people in 1890 up to 7 billion in 2010 and the math tells us what will happen here over the next 100 years.

When you look at the whole situation with respect to humans on this planet, consuming all our resources, living the lifestyle we're living here in the first world and having the third world look at this lifestyle and say "we want to go there" we're on a collision course. It is not slowing down on its own and the only way we're going to avoid hitting the wall at 100 miles an hour is to [take charge] and slow it down.

I've got a responsibility here to future generations.

What are the major environmental problems in clothing manufacturing?

The impact of apparel is in the dye and finishing. The chemicals and the creation of these materials take energy—washing and drying, the use of detergents, the care they require when they're purchased by consumers. Often then they end up in a landfill. So, in a nutshell, apparel causes damage to the environment. I'm trying to mitigate to lessen the impact.

How do you lessen the impact?

Personally, I try to look at my personal footprint compared to my business footprint. This [industry] has a huge impact. But, I'm only a small company compared to some which are massive and as I look at this thing, I'm going Holy Cow. Should I just stop what I'm doing?

Yeah if I don't want to have any impact yes I should shut this place down, but I need to make a living and I feel I need to show other bigger companies what needs to be done because there are ways of doing it and I'm in a position where I'm small and nimble and I'm tackling this one day at a time and finding out about things that lessen the impact every day including clothing recycling.

Boardroom Eco Apparel has been "environmental" since 2004 do you still stand by that original assessment?

Well, 5 years ago we said we're all green, but we're not really environmentally friendly. It's more how do you lessen the impact you're making on the environment? The natural environment sustains me, therefore if I don't protect the natural environment, then I should stop what I'm doing. But I can't, and I want to show people this is the right way to do it, that it can be done.

Is it green washing if a product says it's made from organic cotton?

I tell people there's no such thing as an organic cotton t-shirt, because you cannot grow a t-shirt organically. It's not how it works. You can grow a cotton plant organically at the farm level, where they don't use fertilizers or pesticides and recycle the water you use.

Then it's got to be harvested using tractors, or by hand, and you've got to process it and use energy. You have to spin it into a yarn then you have to make it into a fabric and dye it. But people put so much into the idea that it's organic. But when you use a dye then it doesn't matter: the real difference between organic cotton and normal cotton may only be a 2 to 3 to 5% difference of mitigating the effect on the environment. So really you need to look at the whole thing.

How do you manufacture apparel in an environmentally conscious way?

It starts with the fiber you use. Whether it's organic cotton, recycled polyester or bamboo they all have a certain impact. It depends on how you process the fiber whether the impact will be big or small.

The processing, dyes and waste water have to be looked at. Then there's me having to be aware of my greenhouse gas emissions and waste. I've got to try and take care of it. Then there's also the process of getting it to the consumer, marketing and transportation.

Once it gets to the consumer up to 50 -60 percent of the damage is done, depending on how much you wash and dry and use detergents. Once they're finished with it, do they recycle it by giving it to another human being, or dispose of it, or return it to us with our new closed loop system so we can take our clothes back, melt it down and re-use it?

When it comes to the impact, it's the entire life cycle of the garment that needs to be addressed and by thinking about all these steps I can help mitigate the impact.

You're company uses a lot of recycled polyester. Why?

Recycled polyester just happens to be probably the most environmentally friendly fabric, because it uses the smallest amount of energy. Instead of taking petroleum from the ground then chemically and catalytically cracking it down all the way into PET, you're taking a plastic bottle already in the form of PET, crushing it down then melting it. So there're huge energy savings.

You have to wash a cotton garment in hot water, put it in the dryer because nobody puts it on the clothes line anymore especially in apartments. So you're burning carbon to use energy.

Then there's the use of detergents and ironing as well.

With recycled polyester you can wash it with cold water, put it on the clothes line, there's minimal ironing and it lasts ten times longer than a cotton garment because cotton fibers always fall off.

All that lint in your dryer is usually from cotton, it's not the polyester. You can wash a polyester garment over 100 times and it's still going to look the same depending on if there's any snagging or not.

So I have to consider what fiber I'm using and what its life cycle is. With our new closed loop system we can take our clothes back, melt them down and re-use them, saving energy and helping the environment.

Do you think Vancouver is leading the way in terms of environmentally friendly manufacturing and design techniques?

I think there's a lot of green given the lifestyle and environment around us.

Is there an Eco Fashion Week and are you involved?

There's an eco fashion week coming up, and I'm on the board of it, so the first thing I said was, 'Okay, if we're going to have an eco fashion week, how are you going to select your people to show? What standard do you use to qualify something as eco fashion?'

You need to set those standards, otherwise everybody's just going to go: "Hey, I recycle the trash of my business therefore I'm environmentally friendly clothing company."

How do you verify a company is "eco"?

What does eco mean for my industry?

To me it means ethical sourcing. So I make sure that look at the garment from the time I choose the fiber to the factory I use and all the processes it goes through. It must be sourced ethically.

I can't say: "Oh, I know this is bad but I'm going to use it anyway because it'll make a great garment." There are standards and compliance audits.

What I do is go to Intertek and Bureau Veritas to audit my factories in Taiwan and China. They are a third party, they send someone in there and audit the factory, making sure there's no child labor or unethical practices. Even here in Canada I use a third party, because it's more efficient to send someone in who knows what to look for, how to ask the right questions, go through the paper work and do all the checks, make sure the payroll is upheld and all safety measures are in place.

I also have a raw materials verification system, so I can say what fibers I use, because I need to verify what fabrics I purchase are what they claim to be.

I need authenticity from the fabric maker that the fibers are recycled PET or come from bamboo so I can show customers the piece of paper.

Do I know personally? No. But that's the next step I'm working on. A system of chain of custody auditing from the time a fiber source is collected to the time is turned into a yarn, putting a tracer in that yarn so in the end I can analyze that fiber and determine whether or not it came from the source I thought it came from.

At the moment there's no differentiation in the fabric; its all the same so how can I prove it? I can't I claim it but I do substantiate it at the moment through a raw material verification system and testing.

We have a document trail, but it needs to be readily available because people don't believe you. We have chemical

and structural testing which is where Blue Sign comes in. They check all the chemicals and all the raw materials that go into making my components ensuring they're clean. It costs \$20,000 a year, but I have to do it.

Then there's textiles performance, which is how the fabric works on the body. We get this done by Spin Sports Innovation Centre. They test how thick the fabric is, what conditions it's working in, its movement and wicking and how it works when worn on the human body. They then test how our products do against leading brands and our products do just as well if not better. So I back up all of my claims through testing and documentation.

What are you trying implement by setting up your company the way you have?

If you look at the entire capitalist world, it's about sustaining growth and economics and its completely contradictory to sustaining the environment.

We can't keep extracting and destroying the environment and believing it's going to go on providing for us. The system is so destructive and logically it can't be sustained. Let's give consumers them the truth and the information and let them decide.



